

CHASE FOR BLISS

The History and Ideas of Lokayata

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Abstract

Among the various philosophical schools of thought in ancient India Lokayata stands unique, as it was the only school that dared to advocate materialist-hedonistic doctrines of life during the time when India was under the sway of Vedico-Upanishadic spiritualism. Although its origin, history and philosophical contexts are buried in the distant past, this epicurean Indian parallel championed an idiosyncratic approach to life by rejecting a life based on spiritual-otherworldly concerns. This article is an attempt to probe into the philosophy of the pursuit of pleasure that the Lokayata upheld probably during the post-Vedic society.

Key Words: Brihaspatya, materialism, Brihaspati, atheistic, pain, pleasure, Buddhism, Jainism, pramana, philosophy, sceptic.

Lokayata, which is originally known as Charvaka and Brihaspatya, is one of the most ancient atheistic (nastika) philosophical schools of Indian materialism. Brihaspati is generally referred to as its founder, although some of the recent writers on 'this worldly' philosophy have refuted this viewpoint. Sage named Ajita Kesakambali is said to be one of its greatest proponents. Notwithstanding the attempts by the scholars to collect the early texts of the Lokayata school of thought, major chunk of its primary writings is not available today. Brihaspatya Sutras or Lokayata sutras believed to be written by Brihaspati is considered to be the original text of this philosophy. However, this original text is lost centuries ago; it is known only from fragmentary quotations used in subsequent texts. In 1928, a historian named Dakshinaranjan Shastri, brought to the light from the lost original, 60 selected verses or sutras in his Brihaspatya Sutram and again in 1959, he discovered 54 slokas claimed to be the slokas from Brihaspatya Sutras. Another historian, Ramakrishna Bhattacharya in his recent article argued that the text is often misquoted and garbled owing to its obscurity and, there is a possibility of great deal of foreign materials being incorporated into the original text. Thus, after having been consigned to oblivion for several centuries, the credit of making it available for the general readers goes to Dakshinaranjan Shastri.

Several texts, mostly produced between the 8th and 12th centuries, contain fragmentary references for the system of Lokayata. A 14th century work on Indian philosophy, composed by Madhava Vidyanaya- the Sarvadarshanasamgraha, provides an overarching account of Lokayata but it rarely reproduces in verbatim from the original text. It simply paraphrases the doctrine appropriate to the temperament of the 14th century learned Vedantins. Apart from this, various Shastras, Sutras, and Epic Poetries, dialogues of Gautama Buddha and Jain literature also contain details for the existence and influence of this philosophy. Jayarasi Bhatta's Tattvopaplavasimha is yet another exegesis that provides comprehensive account of this school of thought.

While acknowledging the profundity of Jayarasi Bhatta's work, scholar Eli Franco concluded that "Tattvopaplavasimha is the only genuine and undisputed Lokayata text which has been discovered so far".

Origin and History of Lokayata

Among the various schools of philosophy that ancient India had produced, Lokayata is regarded as one of the most ambiguous weltanschauungs. In his famous work Unadisutra, a 12th century Jaina scholar and grammarian, Hemacandra opined that etymologically, the term Charvaka is originated from two Sanskrit words, 'charu' and 'vaak', meaning 'agreeable' and 'speech' respectively.¹ More clearly, it denotes, 'agreeable speech' or ordinarily, 'sweet-tongued'. Some other scholars argued that it has stemmed from the root 'charv', meaning 'to eat', probably to call attention to the schools' sybaritic and epicurean precepts such as 'eat, drink, and be merry'. In Sanskrit, it is understood to have the meaning 'carvatyatmanm carvakah' or one 'who manducates or chews the self'. Yet another scholar conjectured it to be eponymous in root, with the chief architect of the school being Lokayata, an acolyte of sage Brihaspati, and for the reason, Brihaspatya Sutras became its central text. Scholar Bhattacharya suggested that, the word Lokayata is of asymmetrical construction, as an adjective 'Chara' implies 'pleasant', and as a noun, is another name of Brihaspati, and both inferences are well grounded. He opined that Lokayata could be one of many agnostics or sceptics, materialist schools that prevailed in ancient India to systematically present its basic principles in aphoristic style. Quite recently, Prof. Chattopadhyay also surmised that perhaps the early name of Charvaka was Lokayata; it was addressed so as Lokayata was popular (ayatah) among the people (lokesu), as representing their worldly perspectives. Similarly, the encyclopaedic meaning of Lokayata is 'directed towards this-world' or 'material world or worldly' or 'confined to the world of common experience'.

In early 20th century writings, Lokayata has been given different interpretations based on divergent secondary literature. As its basic texts are non-extant today, or available only partially, a number of scholars suspected if it was a philosophical school at all. Historians Satishchandra Chatterjee and Dharendra Mohan Datta, in their book argued that, "Though, materialism, in some form or other, has always been present in India, and occasional references are found in the Vedas, the Buddhistic literature, the Epics, as well as in the later philosophical works, we do not find any systematic work on materialism, nor any organised school of followers as the other philosophical schools possess. But almost every work of the other schools' states, for refutation, the materialistic views. Our knowledge of Indian materialism is chiefly based on these". In fact, excessive clinging on to the secondary sources has actually resulted in the creation of several antithetical views and positions including biased and exaggerated ones. It may also be noted that many of the opinions on the school are not firmly grounded on good evidences or based on first-hand information of the Lokayata texts.

Reference for the philosophical thought of Lokayata can also be seen in Kautilya's Arthashastra. He calls it as one of the three logical system of ideas or anvikshiki (science of inquiry or atmavidya), the other two being Samkhya and Yoga. In the text, it is largely portrayed to as a science of logic or debate, or 'criticism'. However, he did not consider it as a philosophy incompatible with the central teachings of the Vedic texts but as part of its doctrinal flow. Rudolf Franke, a German scholar, construed Charvaka as 'logically explanation of the nature'. An 8th century Jaina poet, Haribhadra, in his text, Saddarsanasamuccaya

argued that Lokayata was one of the major Hindu philosophical schools, whose underlying tenets can be described succinctly thus: 'there is no God, no samsara (rebirth), no karma, no duty, no fruits of merit, no sin'. If Divyavadana, a Buddhist work, defined Lokayata a science of 'logic', Adi Shankara reckoned the word to mean materialism. For a logical purpose, he preferred the term Lokayata over Charvaka as he thinks the former mostly conveys 'this-worldly' meaning. He argued that, in ancient Indian writings, the terms such as Lokayata, Brihaspatya and Charvaka were used interchangeably, and substantially in the meaning of or as synonymous for the modern-day materialism or 'possessive' philosophy.

Though the name Lokayata first appears in the post-Rigvedic writings, a detailed discourse on it can be seen only in the post-Vedic literature. In the later writings, it is basically viewed to be an alternative to the theistic schools of thought and as a philosophical antecedent of the later atheistic schools such as Jainism and Buddhism. However, repudiating this argument in his *The Ethics of India*, E. W. Hopkins claimed that such question does not arise as Brihaspatya philosophy was contemporaneous to Jainism and Buddhism. He suggested that the early Lokayata or materialist-sceptic philosophy had been evolved, though in nascent form, in the 6th century BC.

The influence of profane thought or scepticism is explicitly found in the chapter 108 of the Ayodhya Kanda of the epic Ramayana, in which great sage Jabali tries, by citing nastika arguments, to persuade Rama to assume the throne and accept the kingship: "O, the highly wise! Arrive at a conclusion, therefore, that there is nothing beyond this Universe. Give precedence to that which meets the eye and turn your back on what is beyond our knowledge". However, Rama disproves Jabali's appeal, and Rama's arguments are placed in the chapter 109 of the same Kanda.

In Indian philosophy, Lokayata is viewed as a positivist and heterodox school of thought. It is founded on certain principles which are basically contrary to the philosophies based on the Vedas and Upanishads. The main tenets, commonly associated with this school, are the following:

The Concept of Knowledge

The Lokayata admits the validity of only Pramana, i.e., perception, and rejects both inference and verbal testimony. It holds Pramana as the primary and right source of knowledge; inference is prone to be either right or wrong and, hence, conditional and invalid. Conclusions based on reason lack decisiveness because they rest on some inductive truths, which, though highly probable, is never presented as certain or real. Therefore, Lokayata accepts only perceptions as the correct method of ascertaining truth and classifies it into external and internal. External perceptions are arising from the interaction of five senses and worldly objects and internal perceptions are that of inner sense, the mind.

Inference is the truth derived from observations or based on previous truths and hence, described as a conclusion. For Lokayata, it is reasonable and valuable, and hence, useful but without error or prone to unauthentic, as 'inferred truths' can never be without doubts. More correctly, Lokayata states that whenever one infers a truth from a set of truths or observations, one should admit doubt; inferred knowledge is, hence, conditional. Lokayata admit that there are no definite or reliable way by which the adequacy of inference as a means of right knowledge could be established. Hence, one of the major principles of Lokayata is its refusal to entertain inference as a means of valid, universal, and metaphysical knowledge or truths.

Metaphysis

Lokayata argued that metaphysical truth cannot be obtained, ascertained or proved by means of inference. Instances where inferences are conceived to be right or justified by the result should be understood only to be mere serendipities or coincidences. Lokayata outrightly rejected the metaphysical-spiritual-transcendental concepts, which formed central to the other theistic schools of the time, particularly the Vedas, such as the notion of supernaturalism, rebirth, the presence of the soul in ephemeral body or the extracorporeal soul, benefits of the spiritualism and ritualism, the notion of other-worldly or afterlife (heaven and hell), idea of fate and accumulation of merit (punya) or demerit (papa) through the performance of karma or actions etc. They not only rejected the use of supernatural precepts to describe natural events and occurrences, but observed that for the occurrence of natural phenomenon requires no occult or extramundane powers, rather produced spontaneously from the inherent nature of things. Their famous aphorism was that: 'The fire is hot, the water cold, refreshing cool the breeze of morn; By whom came this variety? From their own nature was it born'. Sarvasiddhanta Samgraha, a Lokayata text, states the central tenets of the philosophy thus: "There is no other world other than this; There is no heaven and no hell; The realm of Shiva and like regions, are invented by stupid imposters".

Theory of Pleasure

Lokayata emphatically argued that enjoying sensual pleasure obtained through sense organs or indriyas is morally a just act, and there is nothing wrong or amoral about it. Maximum enjoyment of material happiness, if required, by adopting spiritually unjust ways such as stealing, cheating etc, should be the goal of human life; there is nothing wrong in sensual gratification and hence, 'eating honey gathered through a means of loans', or 'runamapi kratva madhum pibha'. More clearly, they completely rejected the significance of ethics and morals in terrestrial life, and suggested that 'until life remains, let a man live happily, let him feed on ghee'. Since pleasure is always accompanied by pain, and it is impossible to have the former without the later, Lokayata argues, intelligence lies in enjoying maximum pleasure and avoiding pain or reducing pain to the minimum. Unlike the Vedas and other theistic religious sects of the Indian philosophy, Lokayata reject austerities, denouncing sensual pleasures out of fear of pain or trepidation, or apprehension of after-life stories, and argued that such imaginations or reasonings are nothing more than acts of stupidity. Lokayata's conclusion on pleasure and pain is briefly stated thus in the Sarvasiddhanta Samgraha: "The enjoyment of heaven lies in eating delicious food, keeping company of young women, using fine clothes, perfumes, garlands, sandal paste...while moksha is death which is cessation of life-breath... the wise, therefore, ought not to take pains on account of moksha. A fool wear himself out by penances and fasts. Chastity and other such ordinances are laid down by clever weaklings".

Scholar Haribhadra opined that, Lokayata believed in a philosophy that 'there is nothing beyond the senses, consciousness is an emergent property, and that it is irrational to seek what cannot be seen'.

Theory of Religion

For espousing philosophical scepticism and hedonism, Lokayatas rebuffed many of the standard spiritual-religious postulations of the Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. The central metaphysical elements of the latter religions such as God, incarnation, atman, body, eternity, samsara, rebirth, renunciation etc. are

rejected as philosophical misconceptions in Lokayata. It also disapproves the spiritual teachings of Buddhism and Jainism and rejects them as irrational assumptions. The Vedas and Vedantic teachings have become subjects of rebuttal in Lokayata, Sarvadarshana Samgraha states, the latter claimed that the ancient texts are overwhelmed with pseudo theories of life and spirit. In other words, Lokayata claimed that the early texts are filled with full of contradictory and false theories and statements about life here and here after, and hence, unworthy of consideration.

It may be noted here that, the fundamental teachings of the Vedic schools of thought and materialist Lokayata's are irreconcilable as they fall apart in their central philosophical claims and observations. The Lokayatas refute the authority of the Vedas and conferring on them the divine status. In fact, it is opposed to all that is conceived as good and virtuous in the Vedic tradition. If Upanishads accept vayu, agni, jala, prthivi and akasa as panchabhutas or five elements of existence or ultimate facts of the universe, Lokayata speaks of only chaturbhutas, four elements, and excludes akasa from the list. As the Lokayatas are completely content with the earthly-material-sensual happiness (visaya karma), the metaphysical, spiritual and moral value theories which occupy central position in the Vedico-Upanishadic writings do not find place in them. The only virtue it endorses as the supreme is material pleasure. Wisdom lies, it states, in attempting to earn the highest pleasure within one's reach. Similarly, if the Vedas consider themselves as the testimony or Pramana for acquiring right knowledge, the Lokayatas admit only direct perception, empiricism, and conditional inference as the source of truth.

Colonial texts and European Jesuit missionary writings declared Lokayata a rational-logical philosophy of ancient India, which refused to consider faith as superior to reason. In their work, Classical Indian Philosophy, Peter Adamson and Jonardon Ganeri observed: "J. S. Mill sounds like a follower of Brihaspati, founder of the Lokayata system, when he writes in his System of Logic that all organised bodies are composed of parts, similar to those composing inorganic nature".

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